

Völkerrechtsblog

Der Blog des Arbeitskreises junger Völkerrechtswissenschaftler*innen

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PRACTITIONER'S CORNER

Practitioner's Corner: Working for Peace in Afghanistan

MAGDALENA G. AGUILAR PULIDO — 6 October, 2014



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The “Practitioner’s Corner” gives the floor to practicing international lawyers. Their accounts illustrate the diversity of work within the field of international law and offer personal insights into the practice of international law.

I had the opportunity to work for eleven months in Kabul, Afghanistan. With the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to be precise, and to be even more specific, inside one of the UN compounds. The weeks before arriving felt like eternity, because I had been waiting for a long time for such a chance. Since my years at University I

dreamed and wondered what it would be like to work in a peacekeeping mission. When I finally arrived, I felt like anything could happen; like I had made a pact and had put everything in but could not know what I would take out. But to me, the trade was fair: the experience was too precious to let pass.

I worked for the Legal Affairs Unit, giving advice to the substantive and operative areas of the United Nations Mission. During that time I would question myself as to what it actually meant that it was a political mission versus a peacekeeping mission. I knew there were no blue helmets and I also knew that there would soon be a shift in the Mission from the Department of Peacekeeping Operations to the Department of Political Affairs, but what did it actually mean? I guess I still do not have a clear answer, but through the work I was performing and the study I did on the history of the Mission, I understood that despite having a very unfortunate position amid multiple actors, the UN in Afghanistan is serving as a buffer, as a mediator and as a good will ambassador exactly between those and other actors. The Mission is doing work behind closed doors that needs to remain like that in order to secure results, but in parallel it is calling attention to the situation of human rights in the country, the impact of the war on civilians, women and children's rights, and this also causes reactions in the governmental circles, at national and international levels. Despite the difficulties, the Mission is still present and it is still relevant, maybe in these last months more than ever, due to the role as impartial adviser and which would develop into key assistant to the government of Afghanistan to resolve the deadlock the election process had stumbled into while identifying the new president and successor to Hamid Karzai.

During those eleven months with the operation I understood that life in a security-challenging environment certainly is hard and that it is important to stand your ground and determine since the beginning how you want to live in the Mission. To me, it was clear: I was performing a job that I knew very few International Law lawyers would ever access – let alone even consider performing – but to me, it was the magic of knowing that my daily contribution would have an impact in the overall operation of the Mission. Each morning I would walk 100 mts from my room to my office, under the view of the gurkhas (the fearsome and brave Nepalese contingents responsible for the security of the compound) on their posts, catching the eye of the Afghan staff and with an occasional chase from one of the multiple hungry cats that roam the compound, it was not as dangerous as I would have imagined, it was not as safe as I would later learn, but I felt very much alive (even when among my tasks I would also have to review lease agreements or service contracts).

I learned about International Law and UN Law, but I also learned about myself and about key areas of life. I learned that fear can overcome every other emotion and that again, it is a mental game and you have to set your heart to win it; to triumph over the heaviness, and the anguish and take out the positive side. Because to live in fear is terrible, and the only benefit is when you take that odd situation that you have willingly chosen and accepted, and you turn it into something of use. I set my mind to this task and I can say that it was a wonderful experience. It made me appreciate life more and every aspect of it, the good days and the bad ones, the work challenges and having to deal with difficult characters. But moreover, Kabul made me learn that some things are not that important. To keep grudges, not

important; to overanalyze things to a breaking point, not important, to be self-righteous, not important at all.

I remember clearly my first night in Kabul. I had been lucky enough to be introduced on the phone (and at the insistence of a very nice security guy with multiple UN missions in his past) to the only other Mexican in the compound, a kind girl that offered to “take me to dinner” to the restaurant on site. We enjoyed the evening with another nice group of girls that had already experience in these contexts, and when we were returning to sleep, I heard the first gunshots. My new friend reassured me that nothing was happening, until she considered something could be happening, since in any case, it was Kabul after all. In the end she said I would get used to it, and would learn to distinguish celebratory gunshots from “other types” of noises. That night I went to sleep trying to remember that I had been assured that I was probably in one of the safest spots of the whole city...but that was not enough. I went to sleep trying to think of an escape plan just in case there was an attack that night, and was wondering why I had the luck to end in one of the buildings closest to the entrance gate, that that could be of no good, in case someone decided to blow the entrance and attack us.

The first month of my arrival would be the most difficult one security-wise for 2013. Every few days there was a major attack in the city, something that had not been seen in many years, from the International Airport to the Supreme Court, passing through attacks on ministries and ISAF partners, some even very close to our compound. The Taliban offensive was hitting hard and was determined to give a lot of “food for thought” precisely amid the preparation for the 2014 elections. It was tense and unsettling, and it was difficult to think that you were making friends among your

new colleagues, and that you were all exposed, and more those who had to go back to their families outside of the protection of the hesco walls and the barbwire, those traveling to the other UN compounds in the Afghan regions or those doing the daily commute to offices around the city.

Through the few ventures I had into the city, Kabul showed that it was not that different from any other city. Merchant vendors trying to make a living, kids walking to school, traffic police trying to maintain order, but at the same time, you had the sensation of permanently wondering what could happen next and what if you would get stuck close to a police check point or a military convoy, what if you stepped out of the market at the wrong time...Afghanistan is unpredictable and stubborn, and Afghans are determined to live and make the best of it. And I believed that while being there, we had to do the same.

Magdalena G. Aguilar Pulido, LL.M. (Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights), currently works for the UNHCR in Azerbaijan. Opinions expressed in this post are her own.

Tags: *Peacekeeping, United Nations*



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ANDREI ROSTISLAVOVICH

7 October, 2014 at 00:53 – Reply

Those services contracts...
qué orgullo Magda.



MARIE KREIPE

8 October, 2014 at 19:31 – Reply

Magda,

Felicidades por este blog sobre tu trabajo para la paz!
Estoy fascinada de tus experiencias con la ONU y admiro que has tenido el coraje de aceptar una amenaza para tu seguridad personal para lograr un objetivo socialmente tan importante y honorable! Eres una gran personalidad! Como describes tus pensamientos y sentimientos es tan profundo y honesto que me quedo aun mas fascinada! Estoy segura que este blog va a ser de gran utilidad para todos que estan pensando hacer una experiencia parecida a la tuya!

Felicidades de nuevo y un abrazo de corazon,

Marie



CHRISTIAN

13 March, 2016 at 12:12 – Reply

Dear Magda,

This experience is testament to your long-held interest in international issues. You know that I have always admired your commitment to excellence and wish you all the best in your new projects.

Christian

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